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THE MEDIATORIAL OFFICE OF THE VEDIC FIRE-GOD

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The mediatorial office of Agni (Latin *ignis*), the Vedic Fire-god, has never been explained; nor has there ever been an attempt to clarify the relation between Agni as mediator and as avenger, or to show whether either of these functions is extraordinary. Usually the office is taken for granted, as if it were the regular business of Agni to act as a mediator between gods and men. It depends on what is called a mediator whether this is true or not; and the loose use of language has surprising results when non-Sanskrit scholars take up a word used by Sanskrit scholars in a literal sense and employ it in the theological sense. 'Mediator' means literally a go-between, or messenger, and Chaucerian English so uses the word; but the common theological connotation adds to this the idea that the messenger or go-between goes as an intercessor or reconciler between two opposed parties.

Now when the author of *Ethnic Trinities* (and even Tiele) undertakes to show the universality of Christian ideas in religious phenomena, he instances the Hindu Fire-god as a 'mediator,' using the word as applied in Christian theology. As a matter of fact, this gives a very incorrect view of Agni, who does not intercede with other gods for the sake of men. The idea that the fire of the sacrifice helps to appease the wrath of other gods is not wholly absent; but it is worth while to see when and where this idea is found, and especially to learn how it is reached and what it implies.

Usener, in his *Götternamen*, speaks of some gods being 'opaque' and some being 'transparent.' Agni is a transparent god. He is fire, the mighty power that burns the forest, that is lighted on the hearth and on the altar, that is three-fold, born first in the sky, then on the earth, and thirdly in the waters of the cloud. As in Zoroastrianism, fire is also the heat, or life-warmth, the productive

and generating power in plants and animals. He is the son of sky and earth, or, as elsewhere said, he is brought down from the sky.

Agni's normal function is to serve as a messenger of meals to the other gods. He is first fed himself, and then he calls the other divinities to feast. Morning, noon, and eve, meals are prepared for the gods. The fire ascending signals afar, an *ἀγγαρον πῦρ*, to tell the hungry host that all is ready. Agni, in short, is an animated dinner-bell to summon the gods to breakfast, dinner, and supper. As such he is the "friendly messenger" (*passim*), but *qua* messenger he is not mediator, only a "far-goer," *dūtá*, just as Saramā is the messenger of Indra and rain is the messenger of the Rain-god. Nevertheless, as messenger, he tells the gods about men if men desire, and he is occasionally asked to assure the other gods that the sacrificer is pure and sinless. But this does not imply that he asks the gods to forgive the sins of men, or that he does anything to influence the gods in their action, save to bring the message with the announcement that the men who sent it have prepared a feast for the gods. The striking proof of this is that Agni himself is given the same sort of message when another god acts as postman. Thus, in Rig-Veda 7, 62, 2, the sun is invoked to "proclaim us (the worshippers) sinless to Mitra, Varuna, Aryaman, and Agni." What Agni does is to make the sacrificer pure through the sacrifice by carrying to the gods the offering that mollifies them if they are angry. Only thus is he said to free from sin and from the 'bonds' (sickness) which serve to indicate the existence of the divine wrath. In several passages Agni frees from sin directly, as do other gods. Compare Rig-Veda 4, 12, 4, "Make us sinless before Aditi (Earth-goddess); loosen our wrongs (sins), O Agni"; and *ib.* 54, 3, "O Savitar (Sun), render us sinless before gods and men." Another phase of his character also leads to misconception. Agni is called *upa-vaktár* (*vac*, Latin *voco*, cf. *advocatus*), which might suggest (and has suggested) that he is an 'advocate' of men before the gods. Nothing is farther from the poet's mind. As *upavaktár*, Agni is merely 'helper' or, as he is also called, 'arranger' in the business of sacrifice. To be 'messenger and arranger' he is sent down by the gods (8, 19, 21), and *upavaktár*,

applied to him in 4, 9, 5, means merely that he encourages men in sacrificial work, as Soma or Savitar is an *upavaktár* and Indra is an *adhivaktár* (*advocatus* as encourager) in battle.

Agni, still transparent, helps man both by burning with heat the demons of darkness and by giving various things to the worshipper. He gives rain by slaying the dragon that keeps back rain, for Agni is lightning as well as altar-fire. He is begged to keep afar his own injurious dart, for lightning can injure men as well as slay demons (10, 142, 1-3). But chiefly he helps by strengthening the good-will of the gods in his capacity of food-bringer. He is thus, in averting the wrath due to neglect, the saviour (*paraspás*, *trātár*), just as he is a saviour in protecting men from demons by means of his "flaming tooth, like a club." So is Indra a 'saviour'; and in fact, in words which one might well think were originally addressed not to Indra but to Agni, Indra too is in 7, 20, 1, the "strong, active saver from great sin." Not only is Agni *like* the other gods, in relation to men, but he *is* the other gods. Thus he is "like Varuna" in wisdom, and again he is identified with Varuna; he makes the worlds; he guards earth; protects the sky; becomes through his ability the "father of the gods"; and has the standing epithet "son of power," not because, as has lately been suggested, it requires some strength to twirl the fire-sticks, but because, like Indra, who has the same epithet, he is typical of strength, as the gods are called the "sons of immortality." The term for his fresh, abounding strength is *yúvan*, not *juvenis* in the sense of young, immature, but 'fresh' and 'vigorous.'¹

To understand exactly how the conception of Agni approaches that of a mediator, one must start with the wrath of the gods. What is meant by the prayer to Agni, "Keep from us the sin that makes us fall," in RV. 1, 189, 1? This is so little moral that it might be paraphrased with "keep from us the hurt that injures us." The following words show that what is rendered 'sin' is really 'hurt.' So when Aditi, the Earth-goddess, "makes sinless,"

¹ Compare in RV. 1, 155, 6, *yívākumāras*, 'vigorous, not weak,' where *yúvan* is directly opposed to *kumārā*, weak, youthful. This is also the idea in Agni's epithet *Yahú* and *Yahvā*, in regard to which see a paper by the writer in the forthcoming Journal of the Oriental Society.

it means "keeps scathless." Agni is begged to cast the sickness which one man deserves upon someone else. Compare 10, 37, 12, "Whatever verbal or mental act of ours has angered the god, may ye set that wrong down on him who is maliciously opposed to us," where the 'wrong' is the same word rendered 'hurt' above ('sin'). The wrath of the gods is objectified in illness, fever, drought, hurt of any kind, which appears among men and may be cast out. Thus in 1, 114, 4, "Rudra's wrath be cast far from us." In 6, 62, 8, this wrath is cast out (as disease) upon demons. But there is here no appeal to Agni.

The worshipper has no need of a mediator. As he appeals to another god to announce him sinless to Agni, and as he appeals to Agni to announce him sinless to other gods, he appears to demand a herald of his virtue; but this is not his constant attitude. Usually he makes his cry direct to the god whom he worships. Thus in 1, 24, 14: "We make depart thy wrath (*áva te hédo īmahe*) by means of obeisance and sacrifice, O Varuna. Loosen the sins (wrongs) we have done; make loose thy bonds (of sickness) from us." And in 7, 58, 5, "We make depart the wrong (sin, *áva tát éna īmahe*) of the mighty gods." Here the 'wrath' of one passage is the 'wrong' of the other. In both, the worshipper entreats in his own name, not through a mediator, for the removal of the wrath of the gods, which is the hurt incarnate in the victim, the 'wrong' which is sin because it is the visible sign of sin. There is no wrath without sin; hence hurt, the sign of wrath, is, as it were, the very sin itself. Compare the prayer for relief from suffering in 7, 84, 2, "Ye (gods) bind with bonds which are not straps (not literally bonds); may I turn aside your wrath."

But though Agni is too great (not to say synonymous with the greatest gods) to be thought of as if he were a Mithra to an Ormazd or a Marduk to an Ea, and though the normal tone of the sacrificer is one of direct address to his gods in begging him to avert sin (that is, avert the effect of wrath due to neglect), yet Agni has his part to do. Some one must present to the gods the *quid pro quo*. No one supposes that a wrathful god will show mercy without reason. A certain amount of proof of repentance is necessary. And this proof is furnished by renewed zeal in making offerings.

Hence, as Agni is "the priest divine of sacrifice," he is sometimes said to make men sinless himself, and sometimes in the same way to make the gods merciful. On the whole, however, this last is a rare attitude for the worshipper to assume; nor does it imply intercession. In 1, 94, which, from the fact that it mentions a fuller list of priests than is known elsewhere, may be assumed to be rather late, Agni is thus asked to avert the wrath of the Maruts (but the passage is not very clear); and, again, in the opening hymn of the fourth book of the Rig-Veda he is asked to "make go away the wrath of the god." He does this, however, not by interceding for men, but mechanically, as presenter of sacrifice. In 1, 128, 7, another idea is brought out. Here Varuna is no better than a devil, and Agni is begged to save man "from the trickery of Varuna," but this is just as he saves from the trickery of other devils (1, 99, etc.). Hence the tricks and wrath of the spiritual beings go together in one petition of deprecation: "O Agni, do thou keep off divine anger and ungodly tricks" (6, 48, 10). But there is in this office no mediatorial function. Agni drives away evils of this sort as he drives away other evils, for example, curses (Agni "drives curses off"), kills the old dragon, and generally "leads man to the better."²

There are passages in which Agni is entreated to protect man, but in these the gods are rather co-equal workers. Thus, in 3, 1, 15, Agni is besought "with the gods to do the singer a favor and protect." He is the brother of Varuna, the god with whom he is elsewhere identified, and the gods serve him because he serves them, upholding their laws (especially the "laws of Varuna"), so that, if he chooses, he may "blame men to the gods" for neglect of law or sacrifice, as, conversely, he may "sacrifice away" not only the blemishes of the altar but the god himself, the expression, "sacrifice the god away," being identical with "sacrifice the gods' wrath away" and "sacrifice the blemishes away by means of oblations."³

The expression "by oblations" gives the key to this whole series of acts. It makes it clear that there is no more mediatorial idea

² RV. 2, 9, 2; 3, 3, 6; 3, 20, 4.

³ RV. 4, 1, 5; 7, 60, 9; AV. 19, 3, 4.

in any of these passages than there is, for example, in 1, 171, 1, where the worshipper, without addressing Agni at all, says directly to the Maruts (Rain-gods), "By means of this obeisance and hymn I beg for the Maruts' good-will."

Instead of being a mediator, Agni may follow up the faults of the sinner (4, 3, 13), and so appear as a possible avenger of the wrong done against the gods. But there is only one passage where this idea is fully carried out, that is, where Agni is represented as burning with his sharp tooth of flame those who injure the laws of the great gods, Varuna and Mitra, so that "those who are wicked and untrue go to the deep place." This passage represents these gods in a different light from that of the early hymns, where they are their own avengers, and, as Ludwig has observed, shows a later touch. It is perhaps the first adumbration of the later theory of the hell-fire which punishes the wicked according to the scheme of post-Vedic theology. But what is most interesting in it is that it puts the top stone on the edifice of the fire-cult morality of the Rig-Veda, in which Agni as messenger becomes helper of men, punishing the hurtful demons and evading demoniac anger, and at last punishes men themselves, if they do wrong. Yet it must not be forgotten that Agni helps only as the agent of the worshipper. He acts only as a bearer of reconciliation, not as the reconciler. What reconciles the gods is the sacrifice offered by man. Agni is not himself the sacrifice; he merely sees that it is well made and that it reaches the gods. This is a service for which he is duly paid, in that he gets the best part of the oblation himself. There is, however, a Vedic legend to the effect that he once got so tired of this work that he ran away and hid himself, and had to be routed out by the gods and bribed to go to work again.